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ABSTRACT

This paper stresses the need for composition teachers to develop not only student writing skills but also the discourse theory by which those skills are taught. Several assumptions of current discourse theory are discussed, and with each assumption the author proposes research questions and procedures by which teachers themselves can evaluate the theories they use. (RL)

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Teachers of Composition and Needed Research in Discourse Theory

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Whether by preference or by necessity, teachers of composition tend to be pragmatists. Our response to any new theory is most likely to be: What does it imply for our teaching? What specific classroom procedures does it suggest? Are these procedures practical? Will they work for the sort of students we have in our classes? Underlying these questions is at least one major assumption: our primary obligation is to have some influence on the way students compose, to make a difference in students' ability to use written language to give order and meaning to their experience.

As though this obligation were not demanding enough, I want to argue that we have at least one other responsibility. We must not only influence our students' writing, we must also help refine and shape the discourse theory that will guide our work with students. In addition to being teachers, we should also function as discourse theorists and researchers. As we try to fulfill this new obligation, we will need to ask new kinds of questions. Is a given theory valid? Does it do justice to the complexities (and the simplicities) of the writing we see every day? Are the theory's assumptions borne out in writing done by our students?

It's tempting to avoid this sort of question by assuming that the work of highly skilled writers presents the most interesting test and the most dramatic illustration of discourse theory. And, of course, it would be foolish to overlook what such writers can help us discover about the composing process and the nature of effective writing. Yet if discourse theory is to make comprehensive descriptive statements about writing, theorists will have to test their assumptions against the actual performance of writers of quite diverse abilities. In our classrooms, we have unique access to this diversity. The

writing of our students represents a kind of information that is almost impossible to obtain in any context other than a course that is primarily concerned with students' writing. In the remainder of this article, I shall suggest ways we might use this source of information to examine and refine assumptions from current discourse theory. My suggestions will take the form of several research questions and some recommendations about how we might try to answer these questions.

One basic assumption in current discourse theory is expressed in James Kinneavy's claim that purpose in discourse is all important. "The aim of a discourse determines everything else in the process of discourse. What is talked about, the oral or written medium which is chosen, the words and grammatical patterns used -- all of these are determined by the purpose of the discourse."[1] Kinneavy bases this assertion on the work of a number of theorists and on his analysis of pieces of written discourse. Yet Kinneavy's assertion is troublesome for two reasons. First, his statement about process is based primarily on an analysis of written products, rather than an analysis of the choices writers have made as their texts evolve through a succession of drafts. Second, in analyzing a written product, Kinneavy does not usually refer to the reasoning of the writer who actually produced the discourse. Granted, analyses of written products can let us make some inferences about the composing process. Furthermore, there is no simple, quick way to determine a writer's reasons for a given choice of language, syntax, etc. Yet we have, at present, no basis for assuming that analysis of products will let us find out everything we need to know about the writing process. Nor can we assume that writers' own insights will not be useful to us as we try to

understand this process. Consequently, in our complex role of teacher/theorist/researcher we need to consider this sort of research question: What reasons do our students give for the choices they make in producing a piece of writing? Answers to this question should help us raise other questions, which I shall mention below.

To obtain information which would let us answer our first question, we might proceed in one of several ways. We might identify the sort of students Richard Beach calls "extensive revisers"[2] and ask them to let us see all the drafts they create for any given writing assignment. We could then identify the specific changes they make in these drafts and ask them to explain the reasoning that led them to make each change. Or we might follow one or both of the procedures Charles Cooper and I used in a recent study of professional writers' composing process.[3] First, we could ask students to re-write a given assignment so as to achieve a different purpose and appeal to a different audience. We could then identify and ask questions about changes writers had made in their original drafts. A second procedure, one that might be especially useful with student writers who have little sense of the ways a piece of writing might be revised, would be for us to make changes in a draft students have already written. We might alter sentence length or complexity, or we might modify diction, perhaps replacing neutral words with emotive terms, general words with specific. In making such changes, we would have to assure students that we were not correcting or criticizing their work, that what we were interested in were their reasons for accpeting or rejecting changes we had made.

In using any of the procedures I have mentioned, we would need to tape record students' comments so that we could review them a number of times in order to categorize the reasons students gave for their choices. This process of devising categories for their reasons will likely be tedious. But

Cooper and I found that it is possible to set up categories that another reader can use to make reliable judgments about the reasons writers give for their choices.

As we listen to students' comments, we might come up with answers to questions that do not bear directly on our central concern but that have important implications for our teaching.

To what extent do students see composing as a process of making choices? How many of them are able to generate their own alternatives from which to choose?

What proportion of our students are unable to articulate a reason--any sort of reason -- for choices that they have made?

Are certain kinds of choices (e.g., diction) easier for them to justify than are others?

We should also be able to answer other questions that bear directly on Kinneavy's assertion about the importance of purpose in the process of composition:

Do students justify their choices by referring to their basic purpose in writing?

Do they give other justifications for their choices?

Do students give reasons that cannot be accounted for by reference to current discourse theory?

Do students' reasons vary according to the kind of writing task they're doing? (For example: Are there some kinds of tasks in which purpose seems a more important consideration than it does in other kinds of tasks?)

Do the kinds of reasons students give vary according to the skill of the writer?

Answers to these questions may lead us to revise discourse theory so as to accommodate new kinds of reasons students give for the choices they make in writing. Further, it may be that answers to our questions will help us re-define our job as teachers. As we understand the bases students presently use in making choices, we may be able to see how we could help them make even more effective choices.

A second major assumption in current discourse theory is that different writing tasks make quite different demands on writers. The writing strategies that are essential for success with one task may be relatively unimportant for another task. On the face of it, this assumption seems self-evidently true. A letter to a close, sympathetic friend would likely contain language and syntax that would almost never appear in, say, a formal report. Yet students (freshmen, upper classmen, and graduate students), do not always make even the sort of gross distinctions suggested by my examples. Sometimes they approach different tasks with a single set of oversimplified rules ("Mr./Ms X taught us that we should never underline words for emphasis"). At other times, students use in a new context some device (a sarcastic pharse, a sentence fragment) that had previously proved appropriate for a different sort of task. In still other circumstances, students seem to be working toward contradictory purposes or establishing different speaker-audience relationships within what would appear to be a single writing task. This seeming disparity between student performance and discourse theory leads me to raise this question: Is it in fact true that different kinds of writing tasks elicit different kinds of writing performance from students? In the following discussion, I shall be concerned only with writing tasks that teachers assign. It might also be worth our while, however, to consider tasks that students assign themselves, e.g., self-initiated writings that students do outside of class.

To answer this question, we would need to assign students three different writing tasks -- for example: 1) an expressive task in which writers articulate their ideas and attitudes in a letter to a good friend; 2) a persuasive task in which writers try not simply to express their own feelings but also to influence the feelings and actions of audiences that might appear to have little

in common with the writers; 3) an explanatory task in which writers convey information in a straightforward and reasonable manner.

In analyzing students' work on these different tasks, we might consider rather conventional matters such as diction, syntax, and organizational patterns. With diction, we might use the categories Edward Corbett mentioned in Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student.[4] Our research question would become: Does one writing task elicit a greater number of abstract (or connotative or formal...) word choices than do the other tasks? In analyzing syntax, we could draw on the work of Charles Cooper and Barbara Rosenberg[5] who found that certain features of syntax are most useful in making sharp distinctions between certain kinds of expository writing. We could re-phrase our basic question thus: Do different writing tasks lead students to use, on average, longer T-units (or more final free modifiers or more adjective modifiers...) than do other tasks? To investigate organizational patterns, we might draw upon two different procedures. We might look for students' use of transitional relationships identified by W. Ross Winterowd.[6] Or we might pursue Richard L. Larson's claim that within a given type of discourse paragraphs are likely to perform a relatively small number of functions.[7] Thus we might ask: Do different tasks lead students to use different types of transitional relationships or to use paragraphs that fill different types of functions?

To refine our answers to the three questions I have just mentioned, we might have all the papers in our sample evaluated. We might ask several readers, working independently, to place each paper in one of three groups: most effective responses to the task; moderately effective responses to the task; least effective responses to the task. Then we could consider only the papers in the "most effective" and "least effective" groups and re-state our basic

question thus: For students whose writing is rated most effective, can we say that different writing tasks elicit different writing performances? What about students whose work is rated least effective?

Implications of our answers to these questions become clear as we consider two further assumptions from current discourse theory. As a corollary to the premise that different demands of writers, Richard Lloyd-Jones contends that 1) writing must not be judged by general criteria for "good" writing but by what Lloyd-Jones calls "primary traits," criteria that are uniquely suited to the specific task a writer is trying to perform; 2) people who are skillful with one sort of task may not be equally skillful with some other kind of task.[8]

In devising evaluation procedures for the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Lloyd-Jones has illustrated the former assumption; he has designed different scoring guides for each of several writing tasks used in the 1974 assessment. For example, to guide the scoring of one set of persuasive essays, Lloyd-Jones instructed judges to: 1) determine the number of reasons students give in support of their arguments; 2) determine whether or not students elaborate on these reasons; 3) determine what kind(s) of authorities students refer to. For one set of expressive essays, Lloyd-Jones asked judges to decide whether students: 1) entered into an imaginary role specified in the writing assignment; 2) elaborated upon that role by talking about the sort of details and feelings that established a distinct personality.

These scoring guides represent a significant departure from the customary practice of judging all expository writing by a single set of criteria, e.g., the categories found in an analytic scale. And this departure raises some problems for teachers and researchers. Whereas we once could use a single, widely-agreed-upon procedure for evaluating all the writing done in a given mode, we

may now have to use a variety of evaluation procedures, most of which we have to create for ourselves. Since Lloyd-Jones' evaluation procedures imply a substantial change in our evaluation of students' writing, we must consider two questions. Would different evaluation procedures lead us to make different judgments about a given student's writing performance? Is any one evaluation procedure especially helpful (or unhelpful) to students?

To answer the first question, we would need to examine one piece of writing from each of forty-five students. We would have each piece of writing judged according to several procedures such as the following:

1. Analytic scale (essays are judged on the basis of such general qualities as organization, clarity, etc.)

2. Primary traits (essays are judged on the basis of criteria that seem uniquely suited to the specific writing task. For example; persuasive essays would not be judged on some general criterion such as organization but, rather, on some quality such as writers' ability to elaborate upon the reasons they give in support of their position.)

3. Analysis of specific qualities such as:

   A. use of some of the transitions that Winterowd suggests are essential to "coherence";
   B. deviations from standard usage;
   C. syntactic complexity.

I mention these specific qualities with some reluctance. They probably should be included in an analytic scale. Yet each of these qualities is often treated independently as a significant feature of "good" writing. When our colleagues complain to us that we're not teaching students to write, they often mean that they're tired of seeing misspelled words and sentence fragments.

Each of the forty-five papers would have to be rated by using each of the 5 procedures (once using an analytic scale, once using a primary trait scoring guide, once according to the number and kinds of transitions used...). After each rating, we would need to arrange the papers into three groups of equal

size: superior, average, poor. Then we would be able to ask this question: As we vary the evaluation procedure, do the same papers keep appearing in the same groups? The answer would tell us whether different evaluation procedures result in different judgments about students' writing.

To determine whether any one evaluation procedure is especially helpful to students, we might consider how that procedure affects students' writing performance and how that procedure affects students' attitudes toward writing. To carry out this investigation, we would need ten or twelve classes of students, taught by five or six teachers. We would have to be sure that students were randomly assigned to these teachers and that each class would be conducted in the same way, that the only difference would be the evaluation procedure used. For an entire semester, students would be asked to write a rough draft of each essay, receive feedback on that draft, and use that feedback to revise their rough draft. In some classes, feedback would be guided by a teacher's use of an analytic scale. In others, it would be guided by a primary trait scoring procedure. Our analysis would be based on students' first and last writing assignments of the semester. We could give judges a pair of essays from each student, a revised draft of the student's first essay of the term and a revised draft of the student's final draft of the semester. Our question for the judges would be: Which essay in each pair is the better essay? After we have judges' evaluations, we would be able to answer these questions: In each group of students (those whose instruction included evaluation by an analytic scale and those whose instruction included evaluation by primary trait procedures) what proportion of the students showed improvement in their final essay of the term? In this proportion substantially higher in one group than in the other?

Answers to these questions would let us determine whether one evaluation procedure was more useful than another. To find out whether one evaluation procedure had a greater effect on students' attitudes, we could use a relatively simple measure developed by John A. Daly and Michael D. Miller.[9] This measure asks students to indicate their reactions to twenty-six statements (e.g., I'm nervous about writing; People seem to enjoy what I write) about writing. We would need to ask students to respond to these statements at the beginning of the term and at the end of the term. We would then ask 1) how many students in each group showed a decrease in their apprehension about writing and 2) was the proportion of students showing a decrease in apprehension substantially greater in one group than in the other?

Once we feel reasonably confident about the sort of evaluation procedures we need to use, we could go on to ask whether students who are successful with one sort of writing task are equally successful with other kinds of writing tasks. To answer this question, we might be able to use as few as four classes of students -- two from each of two teachers -- but we would need at least four pieces of writing from each student. Two of these pieces of writing might ask students to perform a persuasive task, the other two might involve expressive tasks. After collecting these papers we would need to remove students' names and ask judges to use a specific scoring procedure to group the responses to each assignment into three sets: most satisfactory, moderately satisfactory, unsatisfactory. Once all the papers had been rated, we could identify those students whose papers were most consistently rated superior for one kind of task. Then we would need to ask if those same students were consistently rated superior for the other sort of task.

If it is true that students are likely to be more successful with one sort of writing task than with others, and if it is true that we must vary our evaluation procedure according to the specific writing task at hand, we may have to make substantial changes in the way we assign and evaluate writing. We will have to structure writing tasks much more carefully, being sure that we don't equate tasks that make substantially different demands on student writers. If different kinds of tasks really do make different demands/require different skills, it seems a little unfair to treat writing performance globally, either judging all expositions by the same criterion or averaging an A in expression with a C in persuasion to produce a meaningless B that reflects neither ability.

Studies proposed in this article are relatively simple. They can be carried out by a single teacher or by a few colleagues in a single composition program. Because of their limited scope, it seems unlikely that any of these studies will be definitive. Considered individually, none will enable us to generalize about all composition students in all circumstances; none will, once and for all, refute or confirm basic assumptions in discourse theory. Yet as a number of us begin to ask the same sort of questions and pursue related studies, we should be able to obtain information that will be useful in several ways. At the very least, our work should help us insure that discourse theory does not become a procrustean bed for our own students. By testing theory against the real world of student writing, we can insure that our assumptions are reasonable, that they do justice to our students' writing. In addition, we may find that this process of testing helps us refine or at least raise useful questions about the assumptions of a discipline that is still in its formative stages. And finally, this testing may give us more insight into our students' writing and, consequently, into our job as teachers. If our studies do not lead us to certainty,

they should enable us to fulfill our multiple roles of researchers, theorists, and teachers. Our students and our discipline can only benefit.

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